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THE STONEHILL JEWISH SONG COLLECTION

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INTRODUCTION

by Miriam Isaacs, Ph.D.

This website, in its initial release, contains over sixty songs drawn from the Ben Stonehill Archive. The Stonehill Archive totals over one thousand songs, and over time we will be working to put all of them up on this site. This project was undertaken during a fellowship I held at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, where I worked closely with the museum's musicologist, Bret Werb.

What Ben Stonehill Did and Why

In 1948, [Ben Stonehill](#), a lover of Yiddish, was aware of how much had been lost to surviving Jews in terms of cultural heritage. He took on a project on his own, to obtain and lug heavy recording equipment from Queens to Manhattan. In the lobby of the Hotel Marseilles (West 103rd Street and Broadway on Manhattan's Upper West Side), Stonehill recorded over a thousand songs from Holocaust survivors, who were being temporarily housed. This website is a tribute to him and to his performers.



Ben Stonehill and His Sons, 1948

Courtesy of Lenox Stonehill and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum

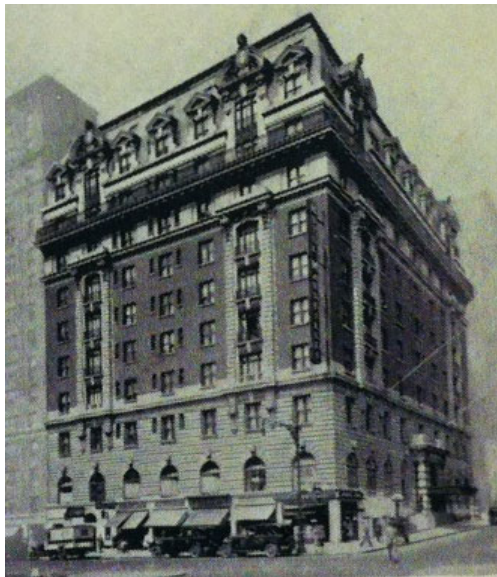
As a working man, Stonehill did not have the time to transcribe and translate the songs he had collected. He had it in mind to write his own book, which was to be titled, “Legend of a Yiddish Song Collector.” His act of dedication and personal involvement with refugees is important, not only because of the many treasures he gathered, but because, by taking the time and trouble to record the voices of survivors and speaking to them in their own language, he was affirming their own identities. He and others let them know that some in America knew their language and that some cared about the world they had left behind.

Stonehill’s early death from cancer in 1964 made that project impossible for him to complete his project, but he managed to leave his legacy by donating the collection to the Library of Congress's American Folklife Center, personally supervising the transfer to tape. The collection has been digitized by the Library and is now housed in the American Folklife Center, at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, the YIVO Institute and Yad Vashem. The New York City-based Center for Traditional Music and Dance has graciously offered space for this collection on its website, through the Center's [An-sky Institute for Jewish Culture](http://www.ctmd.org/stonehill.htm).

Why These Songs Matter

I have taken on this project because I believe that these songs offer window into the world of refugees. What was their repertoire, what did they choose to present and how did they frame it? We hear, in these hours of recording, a bygone world of the survivor subculture.

The process of singing in community, even though temporary community, has healing powers and this group did not have the luxury of therapy. Many of the songs sung by DPs (displaced persons) in the immediate postwar period address the emotional difficulties of coming to terms with the war's effects, with the survivors' questions of how to move forward. The songs were recorded in a semi-public place, a hotel lobby. By three years after war’s end, survivors were still looking for old friends and family but making new ties, looking for mates, and marrying. They formed their own inner communities, a process that had begun in the DP camps.



The Hotel Marseilles, New York City

Stonehill's record of sound brings to us a kind of time capsule and being able to listen in gives one an understanding of the inner world of the survivors, their diversity, their moods and memories. It is a snapshot taken only a short time after liberation, before pressures to Americanize and forget what had happened took away some of the inclination to express what had happened to them. Songs were the vehicles, often, of conveying their stories.

Literature on the importance of songs makes it clear that music was a form of spiritual resistance. Survivors busied themselves, during and after the war, in composing songs and later collecting and compiling them. The individuals engaged in this activity performed an important social function. The composers, singers and collectors were lauded and valued by their fellow sufferers and have since become icons in the ever-shrinking world of Yiddish lovers.

The Importance of the Year 1948 - Understanding the Context

While the war officially ended in 1945, in fact, for most of the Jewish survivors, the aftershocks were still felt. Many were homeless, bereft. Meanwhile, the global dynamic shifted and they were caught up in that shift. Yiddishists formed a significant conference in New York City in that year, to assess what was left of the Yiddish world and try to rescue what they could. Shmerke Kacherginsky, one of the important voices in this archive, came to New York for this event and recorded songs for Stonehill. Meanwhile, the state of Israel was formed— many of the songs have Zionist themes, though they were performed in America. The Soviet Union was persecuting, killing, Yiddish writers, and the Red Menace was a force to be contended with in Europe. Many Jews who had formerly been communist or socialist were reevaluating their political loyalties. In that same year, Yiddish writers in the Soviet Union were being persecuted. Those who once had communist loyalties were often disillusioned. Others had Zionist ideals and now there was a new country. Other singers were from out of the yeshiva world and new communities of orthodox Jews were forming in the New World. Still, many DPs were still sitting in refugee camps in Germany and elsewhere. Such was the climate in which these singers were living, with one foot in America and many longings still for what they had lost in the old world.

About the Songs

After working on the songs of the Stonehill collection for three years now, I have excavated only a fraction, a third at most. My reactions to the materials have shifted over time. My initial reaction, upon reading the list of the songs' first lines, a list that Stonehill himself had made, was of a longing for home. That meant both the lost homes from before the war and a longing for new homes. I think of these songs as voices from a lost world, like Atlantis. The tracks, as mp3s, are many many more than the transcribed songs. I have spent many months listening in, and have segmented many tracks from the continuous stream of sound to organize them thematically.

Below is a categorization of the songs that are transcribed. Of the over a thousand songs Stonehill collected, I have only tracked a goodly portion so more remains to be done from the nine reels and 39 hours he collected. I hope I have made a good dent.

Collecting Jewish Cultural Treasures in a Po..



*Video of Miriam Isaacs's Lecture at the Library of Congress
About the Stonehill Collection, November 13, 2013*

Categorization proved tricky. Some are clearly love songs, some fall neatly into religious traditions. But the bulk of the songs are clearly responses to what had just happened to them and to their whole destroyed world. I have grouped songs roughly by theme, sometimes cross-listing them. Stonehill created a handwritten list of the first lines of the 1052 in the order in which they were gathered. Some songs are sung more than once by different singers, with some variation, reflecting a folk process.

The titles of the tracks mp3s, list the songs by a shortened version of these first lines most of the time, and changed to standard orthography, that is, unless the song is well-known by title. Stonehill asked the singers to write the first lines of the songs on little slips of paper, which they brought in and from which is list derives.

I here list songs roughly by theme, identifying only the ones transcribed and translated. Some songs lend themselves to more than one category. While

many of the songs deal directly with the experiences of the camps, ghettos or partisan life many more reflect the singers responses to the war in indirect ways. Thus, songs from before the war that philosophize about old age, or deal with loss of loved ones or home provide an emotional release for the great loss almost all the survivors felt.

THEMATIC LISTING

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Resistance and Partisan Songs

These songs are often derived from pre-war left wing activist songs. They are the sorts of songs meant to inspire courage and even self sacrifice for a cause. Some are from the Yiddish Bund. Some are communist. Sometimes the songs speak of revenge against the enemy .

- [7. Botvin is Akhtsn \(Botvin was Eighteen\)](#)
- [8. Brider mir hobn geshlosn \(Brothers We Agreed\)](#)
- [17. Fin di Varshever ganuvim \(Of the Warsaw Thieves\)](#)
- [25. Khaver Engel \(Comrade Engel\)](#)
- [30. Mir kumen on \(We are Coming\)](#)
- [33. Pak zikh ayn \(Pack Up\)](#)

Humorous Songs

Imagine an assortment of young and older men, sitting around a lobby, trading funny and often smutty songs and giggling. What a wonderful counterpoint to such a terrible past. Many of the men and women are a in the market for a wife or husband, or at least romance. Many have already married in the DP camps and one can hear the infants in the background. Some of the singers are children. Many of the songs are bawdy, smutty songs that involve a rebbe and his wife. Some of these songs are misogynistic, a product of a certain time and place.

- [1. Nekhtn bin ikh geven af yene velt \(Yesterday I was in Heaven\)](#)
- [19. Ikh gedenk dem tog fun mayn geboyrn \(I Remember the Day of My Birth\)](#)
- [20. Ikh bin geboyrn fun a shteyn? \(Was I Born of a Stone?\)](#)
- [22. In a gitn pirem bin ikh geboyrn \(I Was Born on a Good Purim\)](#)
- [36. Simkhes toyre bay dem tish, iz dos ales freylekh \(Simkhes Toyre at the Table, Everything is Joyful\)](#)
- [58. A simkhe a gedile \(What a Joy and Celebration\)](#)
- [0109. dos hob ikh gezen af yene velt](#)
- [0110. A brokh getrofn](#)
- [0111. Alef bet](#)
- [0112. Alef beys](#)
- [0113. Av iz a foter](#)
- [0114. Bashe Kusak oy der rebe der rebe](#)
- [0115. Bay dem potchok shteyt a hayzl](#)
- [0116. Der rebe du dort](#)
- [0117. Di mame fleg mir zogn az mazl miz men lobn Amerike ganef](#)
- [0118. Smutty song and mame siz geven a mekhaye](#)
- [0119. Es iz amol a nes geshen rebetsn](#)

- 0120. Hob ikh mir an eyntshik daym
- 0121. In a shtetl nisht vayt fun danen ay ay ay
- 0122. Kozaynr lebn iz azoy tayer
- 0123. Mayn waybele antlofen
- 0124. Mein weibe ant loffen
- 0125. Moschiakh in tel Aviv
- 0126. Moyshe kligerman brokh getrofn
- 0127. O senior si si yo yo
- 0128. Oy a rebetsn humor
- 0129. Oy oy baym rebn shtayt
- 0130. Parody of tumbalalaika
- 0131. Rabeynu tam
- 0132. Reb shmeye lebn
- 0133. Simkhas toyre bay deim tish
- 0134. Tsipe dvoyre
- 0135. Vaybeleh un maydlekh bawdy songs
- 0136. Vayberishe maydelkh hot rakhmunes af man klaynem
- 0137. Vel shoyt mer nisht ganvenen
- 0138. Zay freylikh
- 0139. Zayt freyleikh kadye
- 0140. A floig iz arop
- 0141. Der klayner smutty songs mame siz geven a mekhaye
- 0142. Shabes nukh di kigl

Camp (Katzet) and Ghetto Songs

- 6. In Shventshin
- 9. Buziner lebn iz azoy tayer (Buzin Life is Very Dear)
- 11. Not Available
- 12. Dort in dem lager in a vinkele bay nakht (There in the Camp in a Corner at Night)
- 13. Dortn vu ales geyt in mitn veg (There, Where Everything is Going in the Middle of the Road)
- 14. S'iz geven a gehenem oto do (It was Hell Here)
- 21. Ikh hob a nayem glock geshafn
- 37. Vayl ikh bin a yidele
- 143. 7 gite yur
- 144. Autos tramvayen torn nit kligen
- 145. Autos tramvayen
- 146. Coolies
- 147. Di zelbe gasn un tramvayen
- 148. Dray Lilien
- 149. Es iz a klug Lodz ghetto
- 150. Es iz geven a gehenem
- 151. Fray shvimen shifn af yamen svet gesheh Shmuel Levy
- 152. Friling
- 153. In a Litvish derfl
- 154. In barak
- 155. Ir zayt nit geven in Treblinka
- 156. Kozaynr lebn iz azoy tayer
- 157. Mir shteyen bay di vent Lodz ghetto
- 158. Mlotek shiye vil nisht zayn in lager vil lebn
- 159. Nisht kayn tog un nisht kayn nakht
- 160. Nisht kayn un nisht kayn nakht

- [161. Oy a shtruf hot mir](#)
- [162. Oys di felder un shleser di gantsa velt iz nor vi a kholem](#)
- [163. Shluf mayn kind fun lager in Transnistrea](#)
- [164. Strassenhofer hymn](#)
- [165. Talk in lager ina vinkele bay nakht aygene kombinatsye](#)
- [166. Treblinka dort avrum](#)
- [167. Treblinke dort](#)
- [168. Vagonen](#)
- [169. Vet zi oysgeyn](#)
- [170. Vi zenen mayne 7 gite yur](#)
- [171. Vus iz in Ldz gesheyn](#)
- [172. Vus shaynstu levune](#)

Songs of Exile and Homelessness

Songs of lost homes, longing, are part of a long tradition of benkshaft lider. Some of these are also Zionist songs and hope for a new home. Most survivors could not return home after the war and longed for memories of home.

- [24. In vildn vald \(In the Wild Wood\)](#)
- [26. Khotsh \(Though\)](#)

Lost Youth and Old Age

There are quite a few songs, reflecting a mood of loss and the fragility of life. None of these are translated here but there are quite a few mps in the files.

Love and Courtship

Many of the survivors were young and courtship was on their minds.

- [4. Feygele \(Little Bird\)](#)
- [16. Tokhterl du Mayns \(My dear Daughter \)](#)
- [27. Di mame hot a teckterl \(A Mother had a Daughter\)](#)
- [34. Shadkhn tsi zan \(To be a Matchmaker\)](#)

Lullabies, Mothers, Orphans and Children

Many of the survivors had lost children and most had lost parents and grandparents. So it is little wonder that many songs touch on these particular losses.

- [5. Azoy vi a khulem, ze ikh atsind \(Like a Dream I Now See\)](#)
- [28. Tuk, tuk, tuk](#)

Religious Songs

Many of the singers come from religious backgrounds and the corpus includes a variety of songs that touch on religion. There are cantorial songs and other songs that employ a cantorial style. Some songs are about yeshiva life, sometime critical or mocking of that world and other times turning to religion for support and comfort. Some of the songs are traditional songs one knows from Jewish holiday cycles.

- [10. Der rebbe hot gevolt nokh erez yisroel forn \(The Rabbi Wanted to Travel to Israel\)](#)
[15. Eyns eyns \(One, One\)](#)
[18. Ven der rebe zugt zayn toyre \(When the Rabbi Says His Torah\)](#)
[31. Mir zenen vi feygelekh fraye \(We are Like Free Birds\)](#)
[32. Miysratzeh berakhamim \(Who can pity?\)](#)

Social Statements and Philosophizing

These songs reflect the complex and troubled process for the survivor who is trying to come to terms with what has happened. These are people in the process of reconsidering the fundamentals. For example, do ideologies hold up? What about Zionism? This is just after the State of Israel had been declared as these songs were sung. Left wing ideologies were also to be rethought in the context of anti-Red menace America and disillusionment with the Soviet regime and Stalin's murderous persecution of Yiddish writers and intellectuals in the USSR. As communism took hold in Poland, many survivors had fled, under continued anti-Semitism, yet the songs remained as did many of the egalitarian principles of socialism. Some songs are fundamental, considering what it means to be a Jew in the world, how dangerous and yet how precious. Another set of songs express cynicism about corruption. And then, there are those who questioned God, how a just God could allow such destruction of the innocent.

- [2. Ayeder mentsh darf dus gut farstheyn \(Every Person Must Understand This\)](#)
[3. Az men shlogt mikh tut es nisht vey \(When They Beat Me, It Does Not Hurt\)](#)
[37. Vayl ikh bin a yidele \(Because I'm a Jew\)](#)
[23. In a sheyne zumer nakht \(On a Beautiful Summer Night\)](#)
[29. Mir khalutsim \(We Scouts\)](#)

Miscellaneous Songs

- [21. Ikh hob a navem glock geshafn \(I Made a New Bell\)](#)
[35. Shtayt a daytsh un trakht \(A German Stands and Thinks\)](#)

About the Singers

Most of the singers are young, in their twenties and some are children. There are babies crying in the background. There are women and men, religious and secular. Some have good voices and others do not. They are not professionals but ordinary people who gathered in their free time to enjoy recording some songs. One hears laughter, cars honking, conversations and children crying. When a singer gets stuck, another often help each other out with lyrics or comments.

Two of the singers are professional. **Shmerke Kaczerginski** had just published a book of Ghetto Songs and was singing songs from that volume (*Geto un Katset Lider*, Buenos Aires: 1948). He tragically perished in a plane crash in 1954. [Click here for a list of songs associated with Kaczerginski.](#) **Diana Blumenfeld** was a noted actress on the Yiddish stage, [click here for a list of songs associated with Blumenfeld.](#)

Who Were the Rest of the Singers?

We only have the names of the singers on occasion. Some singers come back to the mike again and again and after a while their voices are familiar. Some give Stonehill information on themselves, at least the first time they sing. He at times asks them where they come from and where they learned the songs. Many do not choose to give names or only give one name. I write the names as they sound, in YIVO phonetic standard for Yiddish. In the following listing, I give the names of singers rendered phonetically. In his list of songs, Stonehill did not write down their names but in recording he did often ask their names but they did not always comply. As a result, I more often than do not know who sings what songs.

Most of the archive consists of singing, but there is a spoken element. Most notable is a recording of Stonehill's lecture at YIVO in 1964, where he describes, in English, his process, what he saw and felt. He also sings some of the songs. I have made a separate folder of tracks that consist only or mainly of talk.

Someone who calls himself "Avrumshe" sings songs of the Bund. Marsha Bernshtayn, a child, sings several. She spent 4 years in Canada and had been in a children's home in Warsaw before, where she learned those songs. She came at the end of 1939 or early 1940 at age 3, which makes her 8 or 9 years of age. Moyshe Herzog age 12; Yakov Herzog age 14; Ernest Hertzog 14 from Czechoslovakia? (the Herzongs are possibly brothers). Here are additional names of singers: Avrum Berkovits (from Khust), Mendl Yitzkhok, Dov Baratz, Dovid Baygelman (from Lodz), Yosef Cohen, Yosef Grosman, Nakha Ginsberg (from Lodz), David Yeger, Yisroel Moskovitch, Nakha Ginsberg, Lazar Ginsberg (from Pinsk), Aaron Goldman (from Slutsk), Rachman (from Muntaksh in Ukraine, once Romania), Pinchas Tale (Czechoslovakia, age 27), S. Korntayer (from Warsaw), Alexander Kraus, Morris Kashuv (15 Months in US, from Kresivitse in Kutne), Peretz Bialik (Slonim), Moyshe Kligerman, Zalmen Shvimer (Prague, born in Doha in Carpathia), Avrom Priling (Poland, Tshenishev, Galitsye age 22), Karp from Lublin, Bert Mayer from Shlesien, Avrum Berkovitz, Edith Fridman, from Khust, Gita Fridman, Laybe Lieber, Shoshana Royzshe, Hayim Viner from Shteshuv, age 23, Nakha Ginsberg, Lodz, Moyshe Herzog, age 16, Shlagman, Yankev Cohen, Alex Wolkovski, Rome Yakhtse from Krakow. Max Mesing. Menakhem Riger of Tarnov, Leon Rosenberg, Kobe Tsuman, Haim Shapiro, Yuda Sheydi, aged ten Romania, Pinchas Kozlovski, Moyshe Shvimer, Shmuel Levy, Yankl Zats. Morris Zalmen, Lazar Ginsbeg, Nakhe Ginsberg, Israel Moskovitch, Ernest Goldman, William Yelin, Wolf Haber (23), Yafa Aksenfeld, age 9. We are grateful to Itzik Gottesman who put us in touch with Masha Leon, singer of [song #28 - Tuk, tuk, tuk](#). Leon writes about singing for Stonehill [in this article published in the Forward](#).

Notes on Transcriptions and Translations

Of the thousand songs, I here present, the transcriptions and translations of only about sixty from the thousand fifty-two that Stonehill gathered. It is my hope that others will step in and add more of the songs. For the future, also, there should be traditional Yiddish script, they are now in YIVO standard format. The songs are transcribed in the dialect in which they are spoken or sung. Musical notation would be good. Translations are not singable, but meant to convey the meanings of the songs. I do not add what country the town and cities are in since these changed so much.

Press

Links to press coverage of the Stonehill Jewish Song Collection:

[Report on NPR's Weekend Edition by Ravenna Koenig](#)

[Report in the Forward by Masha Leon](#)

[Report in the Daily Dot by Curt Hopkins](#)

[Report by Voice of America by Gail Wein](#)

Acknowledgements

I want to thank the Center for Traditional Music and Dance for making this web site possible, Ethel Raim and Peter Rushefsky. I also want to thank the Marinus and Minna B. Koster Foundation for funding for this project through Yiddish of Greater Washington, Bret Werb of US Holocaust Memorial Museum and their Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, Craig Packard, who has put in lots of time and thought, Lorin Sklamberg of YIVO, and translators Itzik Gottesman and Perl Teitelbaum. Additionally, the Center for Traditional Music and Dance has received support for its [An-sky Institute for Jewish Culture](#) from the Marinus and Minna B. Koster Foundation, the Atran Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Many of the songs are currently not transliterated/translated. We are grateful for any assistance in this work, please contact [Pete Rushefsky](#) if you are willing to donate a transliteration/translation. If you enjoy this website also be sure to visit CTMD's [Yiddish Song of the Week blog](#) edited by Itzik Gottesman.

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